

BOB HAMPTON of PLACER

By RANDALL PARRISH AUTHOR OF
"WHEN WILDERNESS WAS KING" "MY LADY OF THE NORTH"
"HISTORIC ILLINOIS ETC."

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SYNOPSIS.

A detachment of the Eighteenth Infantry from Fort Bethune, during the first mad retreat, had discovered a temporary shelter behind one of the largest boulders. It was a trifle in advance of those later rolled into position by the soldiers, but was of a size and shape which should have afforded ample protection for two, and doubtless would have done so had it not been for the firing from the cliff opposite. Even then it was a deflected bullet, glancing from off the polished surface of the rock, which lodged in the sturdy old fighter's brain. The girl had caught him as he fell, had wasted all her treasured store of water in a vain effort to cleanse the blood from his features, and now sat there, pillowing his head upon her knee, although the old man was stone dead with the first touch of the ball. That had occurred fully an hour before, but she continued in the same posture, a grave, pathetic figure, her face sobered and careworn beyond her years, her eyes dry and staring, one brown hand grasping unconsciously the old man's useless rifle. She would scarcely have been esteemed attractive even under much happier circumstances and assisted by dress, yet there was something in the independent poise of her head, the steady fixedness of her posture, which served to interest Hampton as he now watched her curiously.

CHAPTER II. Old Gillis's Girl.

Guided by the unerring instinct of an old Indian fighter, Gillis, during that first mad retreat, had discovered a temporary shelter behind one of the largest boulders. It was a trifle in advance of those later rolled into position by the soldiers, but was of a size and shape which should have afforded ample protection for two, and doubtless would have done so had it not been for the firing from the cliff opposite. Even then it was a deflected bullet, glancing from off the polished surface of the rock, which lodged in the sturdy old fighter's brain. The girl had caught him as he fell, had wasted all her treasured store of water in a vain effort to cleanse the blood from his features, and now sat there, pillowing his head upon her knee, although the old man was stone dead with the first touch of the ball. That had occurred fully an hour before, but she continued in the same posture, a grave, pathetic figure, her face sobered and careworn beyond her years, her eyes dry and staring, one brown hand grasping unconsciously the old man's useless rifle. She would scarcely have been esteemed attractive even under much happier circumstances and assisted by dress, yet there was something in the independent poise of her head, the steady fixedness of her posture, which served to interest Hampton as he now watched her curiously.

"Fighting blood," he muttered admiringly to himself. "Might fail to develop into very much of a society bell, but likely to prove valuable out here."

She was rather a slender slip of a thing, a trifle too tall for her years, perhaps, yet with no lack of development apparent in the slim, rounded figure. Her coarse home-made dress of dark calico fitted her sadly, while her rumpled hair, from which the broad-brimmed hat had fallen, possessed a reddish copper tinge where it was touched by the sun. Mr. Hampton's survey did not increase his desire for more intimate acquaintance, yet he recognized anew her undoubted claim upon him.

"Suppose I might just as well drop out that way as any other," he reflected, thoughtfully. "It's all in the game."

Lying flat upon his stomach, both arms extended, he slowly forced himself beyond his boulder into the open. There was no great distance to be traversed, and a considerable portion of the way was somewhat protected by low bushes. Hampton took few chances of those spying eyes above, never uplifting his head the smallest fraction of an inch, but reaching forward with blindly groping hands, caught hold upon any projecting root or stone which enabled him to drag his body an inch farther. Twice they fired directly down at him from the opposite summit, and once a flock of sharp rock, chipped by a glancing bullet, embedded itself in his cheek, dyeing the whole side of his face crimson. But not once did he pause or glance aside; nor did the girl look up from the imploring face of her dead. As he crept silently in, sheltering himself next to the body of the dead man, she perceived his presence for the first time, and shrank back as if in dread.

"What are you doing? Why—why did you come here?" she questioned, a falter in her voice; and he noticed that her eyes were dark and large, yielding a marked impress of beauty to her face.

aware of your personal feeling in the matter, or I might have permitted some one else to come here in my stead. Now it is too late. I have never spoken to you before, and do so at this time merely from a sincere desire to be of some assistance."

There was that in his manner of grave courtesy which served to steady the girl. Probably never before in all her rough frontier experience had she been addressed thus formally. Her closely compressed lips twitched nervously, but her questioning eyes remained unlowered.

"You may stay," she asserted, soberly. "Only don't touch me."

No one could ever realize how much those words hurt him. Not until he had completely conquered his first unwise impulse to retort angrily, did he venture again to speak.

"I hope to aid you in getting back beside the others, where you will be less exposed."

"Will you take him?"

"He is dead," Hampton said, soberly, "and I can do nothing to aid him. But there remains a chance for you to escape."

"Then I won't go," she declared, positively.

Hampton's gray eyes looked for a long moment fixedly into her darker ones, while the two took mental stock of each other. He realized the utter futility of any further argument, while she felt instinctively the cool, dominating strength of the man. Neither was composed of that poor fiber which bends.

"Very well, my young lady," he said, easily, stretching himself out more comfortably in the rock shadow. "Then I will remain here with you; it makes small odds."

Excepting for one hasty, puzzled

glance, she did not deign to look again toward him, and the man rested motionless upon his back, staring up at the sky. Finally, curiosity overmastered the actor in him, and he turned partially upon one side, so as to bring her profile within his range of vision. Her dark, glowing eyes were lowered upon the white face of the dead man, yet Hampton noted how clear, in spite of sun-tan, were those tints of health upon the rounded cheek, and how soft and glossy shone her wealth of rumpled hair. Even the tinge of color, so distasteful in the full glare of the sun, appeared to have darkened under the shadow, its shade framing the downcast face into a pensive fairness. Then he observed how dry and parched her lips were.

"Take a drink of this," he insisted heartily, holding out toward her as he spoke his partially filled canteen.

She started at the unexpected sound of his voice, yet uplifted the welcome water to her mouth, while Hampton, observing it all closely, could but remark the delicate shapeliness of her hand.

"If that old fellow was her father," he reflected soberly, "I should like to have seen her mother."

"Thank you," she said simply, handing back the canteen, but without lifting her eyes again to his face. "I was so thirsty." Her low tone, endeavoring to be polite enough, contained no note of encouragement.

"Was Gillis your father?" the man questioned, determined to make her recognize his presence.

"I suppose so; I don't know."

"You don't know? Am I to understand you are actually uncertain whether this man was your father or not?"

"That is about what I said, wasn't it? Not that it is any of your business, so far as I know, Mr. Bob Hampton, but I answered you all right. He brought me up, and I called him 'dad' about as far back as I can remember, but I don't reckon as he ever told me he was my father. So you can understand just what you please."

"His name was Gillis, wasn't it?" The girl nodded wearily.

"Post-trader at Fort Bethune?" Again the rumpled head silently acquiesced.

"What is your name?"

"He always called me 'kid,'" she admitted unwillingly. "But I reckon if you have any further occasion for addressing me, you'd better say 'Miss Gillis.'"

"Heaven preserve me!" he exclaimed good naturedly, "but you are certainly laying it on thick, young lady! However, I believe we might become good friends if we ever have sufficient luck to get out from this hole alive. Darn if I don't sort of cotton to you, little girl—you've got some sand."

For a brief space her truthful, angry eyes rested scornfully upon his face, her lips parted as though trembling with a sharp retort. Then she deliberately turned her back upon him without uttering a word.

For what may have been the first and only occasion in Mr. Hampton's audacious career, he realized his utter helplessness. This mere slip of a red-headed girl, this little nameless waif of the frontier, condemned him so completely, and without waste of words, as to leave him weaponless.

Mr. Hampton was a thorough-going sportsman, and no quality was quite so apt to appeal to him as dead gameness. He glanced surreptitiously aside at her once more, but there was no sign of relenting in the averted face. He rested lower against the rock, his face upturned toward the sky, and thought.

It was no spirit of bravado that gave rise to his reckless speech of an hour previous. It was simply a spontaneous outpouring of his real nature, an unpremeditated expression of that supreme carelessness with which he re-

seeking to impress each faint detail upon his memory—that narrow ledge within easy reach of an upstretched arm, the sharp outcropping of rock edges here and there, the deep gash as though some giant ax had cleaved the stone, those sturdy cedars growing straight out over the chasm like the bowsprits of ships, while all along the way, irregular and ragged, varied rifts not entirely unlike the steps of a crazy staircase.

The very conception of such an exploit caused his flesh to creep. But he was not of that class of men who fall back dazed before the face of danger. Again and again, led by an impulse he was unable to resist, he studied that precipitous rock, every nerve tingling to the newborn hope. God helping them, even so desperate a deed might be accomplished, although it would test the foot and nerve of a Swiss mountaineer. He glanced again uneasily toward his companion, and saw the same motionless figure, the same somber face turned deliberately away. Hampton did not smile, but his square jaw set, and he clinched his hands. He had no fear that she might fail him, but for the first time in all his life he questioned his own courage.

CHAPTER III. Between Life and Death.

The remainder of that day, as well as much of the gloomy night following, composed a silent, lingering horror. The fierce pangs of hunger no longer gnawed, but a dull apathy now held the helpless defenders. One of the wounded died, a mere lad, sobbing pitifully for his mother; an infantryman, peering forth from his covert, had been shot in the face, and his scream echoed among the rocks in multiplied accents of agony; while Wyman lay tossing and moaning, mercifully unconscious. The others rested in their places, scarcely venturing to stir a limb, their roving, wolfish eyes the only visible evidence of remaining life, every hope vanished, yet each man clinging to his assigned post of duty in desperation. There was but little firing—the defenders nursing their slender stock, the savages biding their time. When night shut down the latter became bolder, and taunted cruelly those destined to become so soon their hapless victims. Twice the maddened men fired recklessly at those dancing devils, and one pitched forward, emitting a howl of pain that caused his comrades to cover once again behind their covers. One and all these frontiersmen recognized the inevitable—before dawn the end must come. No useless words were spoken; the men merely clinched their teeth and waited.

Hampton crept closer in beside the girl while the shadows deepened, and ventured to touch her hand. Perhaps the severe strain of their situation, the intense loneliness of that Indian-haunted twilight, had somewhat softened her resentment, for she made no effort now to repulse him.

"Kid," he said at last, "are you game for a try at getting out of this?"

She appeared to hesitate over her answer, and he could feel her tumultuous breathing. Some portion of her aversion had vanished.

"Come, Kid," he ventured finally, yet with new assurance vibrating in his low voice; "this is surely a poor time and place for any indulgence in tantrums, and you've got more sense. I'm going to try to climb up the face of that cliff yonder—it's the only possible way out from here—and I propose to take you along with me."

She snatched her hand roughly away, yet remained facing him. "Who gave you any right to decide what I should do?"

The man clasped his fingers tightly about her slender arm, advancing his face until he could look squarely into hers. She read in the lines of that determined countenance an inflexible resolve which overmastered her.

"The right given by Almighty God to protect any one of your sex in peril," he replied. "Before dawn those savage fiends will be upon us. We are utterly helpless. There remains only one possible path for escape, and I believe I have discovered it. Now, my girl, you either climb those rocks with me, or I shall kill you where you are. It is that, or the Sioux torture. I have two shots left in this gun—one for you, the other for myself. The time has come for deciding which of these alternatives you prefer."

"If I select your bullet rather than the rocks, what then?"

"You will get it, but in that case you will die like a fool."

"You have believed me to be one, all this afternoon."

"Possibly," he admitted; "your words and actions certainly justified some such conclusion, but the opportunity has arrived for causing me to revise that suspicion."

"I don't care to have you revise it. Never Once Did the Man Loosen His Grasping Grip of His Companion. Mr. Bob Hampton. If I go, I shall hate you just the same."

Hampton's teeth clicked like those of an angry dog. "Hate and be damned," he exclaimed roughly. "All I care about now is to drag you out of here alive."

"Well, if you put it that way," she said, "I'll go."

"Come on, then," he whispered, his fingers grasping her sleeve. (TO BE CONTINUED.)

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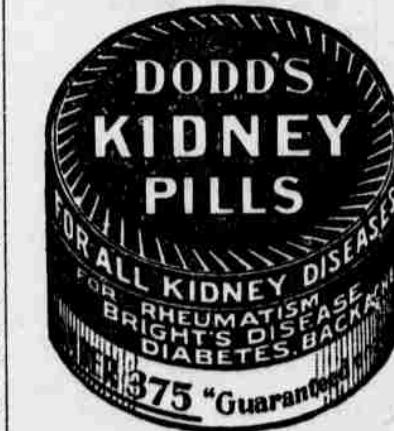
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